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Housekeepers' Chat

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NOT FOR PUBLICATION

Subject: "The Child Who Refuses to Eat." Approved by Bureau of Home Economics, U. S. D. A.

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Do you remember Finicky Florine? She's the little girl I told you about, once upon a time. The little girl who simply refused to eat anything that was "good for her." Carrots, spinach, milk, eggs -- all these perfectly good foods were anathema to Finicky Florine.

Many's the time I've heard Florine's mother say to her: "Now, now, dearie, eat your nice oatmeal, and drink your nice milk. And here's a nice poached egg for mother's precious."

And what do you think "mother's precious" did, under this treatment? She refused to eat "nice oatmeal", drink "nice milk", or eat "nice poached eggs." The "nicer" the food, the more Florine seemed to despise it. Once, she flew into a regular tantrum and threw her porridge bowl onto the floor. Then her father spanked her, and Florine held her breath, and almost frightened her mother into hysterics.

The whole family was almost worn to a frazzle, when Florine's grandmother came to visit. Now Florine's grandmother was a very wise person. She knew that every child feeding problem can be solved, by one method or another, if you have enough patience, understanding, and ingenuity. The first time that Florine's grandmother saw her refuse to eat what was served her, the little girl was allowed to go to bed without any dinner.

"It won't hurt her," said Florine's grandmother. "No healthy child will be starved, or become undernourished, because she is allowed to do without a meal. In fact, it may be necessary for Florine to miss more than one meal, before she learns that I am in earnest."

But it wasn't. The next day Florine took her place at the dinner table, and ate what was served. No one mentioned the unpleasant experience of the night before. It doesn't help to "rub things in" when dealing with a child.

Of course Florine's grandmother knew that "starving" will not always work with a child. Active, healthy little children have every reason to be hungry at mealtime, and as a rule they greet their food with joy. Lack of appetite may be due to over-fatigue, or some other bad physical condition, or to not enough active play out of doors. Sometimes the explanation is even simpler-- nibbling between meals. Even the child who does not have ice cream cones, or candy bars, at odd times, may be taking the edge off his appetite by eating wholesome food, at a time when his stomach should be resting. Some children

may need extra lunch, but if so, the food should be given at a regular time, rather than as a "piece."

Florine's grandmother found that the neighbors had been giving the child bread and butter, and cookies, and candy, between meals. She put a stop to that. Nor was Florine given any more nickels, to drop into the slot of the "Help Yourself" candy store on the corner.

"If parents would only realize," Florine's grandmother told me, "that all of this eating business is so much a matter of habit, they would see to it that only the right habits have a chance to start. By the time the baby is weaned, he should have become acquainted with such a wide variety of fruit, vegetable, and cereal flavors, that adding new ones occasionally would be no trick at all. The trouble is, that mothers often are discouraged, early in the game, when the baby spits out first tastes, and perhaps makes faces. This is a perfectly normal response to the new food, simply because it is new.

"Older children, too, and even adults, often have to become accustomed to something they have not tasted before. It feels strange on the tongue; it may be warmer, colder, or coarser than the accustomed food; it is different, but that does not make it distasteful. Distaste or dislike usually comes under the influence of bad example, or unfavorable suggestion. Often a child is unintentionally encouraged into a dislike by the mother who is prejudiced against the spinach that she is feeding him. Her aversion is strong enough to carry over to the baby, though he is still too young to be aware of what is happening. The slightly older child, proud to be just like daddy, imitates the bad example of his elder, and mimics his father's dislikes.

"Of course, some food prejudices begin in other ways. The food may have been offered when the child was ill, angry, frightened, or otherwise emotionally upset. Perhaps he has unconsciously linked in his mind the flavor of some distasteful medicine with that of the food he is refusing. It is very helpful to trace out these associations of ideas, and experiences, wherever possible, because it is easier for parents to undo a bad habit, when they understand how it began."

I agreed with practically everything Florine's grandmother said, because I knew she had brought up a family of her own, and besides, she has made a special study of children's food habits. When she undertook to make Florine over into a model child, she enlisted the help of the child's parents. She asked them to set a good example at the table, and not to talk so much about what they liked, and what they disliked, and to go easy on comments about what foods are "good for children."

She took special pains, too, those first few weeks, to cook meals which would appeal to Florine. The last time I visited her she had a dinner that most any child would like. I have the menu -- wrote it down so I'd be sure to remember it. Do you want it for your Radio Records? Here it is: Corn Custard; Shoe String Carrots; Brussels Sprouts; Oven-Toasted Bread, Sliced Thin; Apple Sauce; and Cookies.

Now let's look at this meal, dish by dish, and see why it's particularly good for a finicky child.

Take the Corn Custard, for instance. Florine thought she "just couldn't stand" milk and eggs, but -- when they were disguised, in a Corn Custard, she forgot all about her prejudice against these two foods. By the way, do you know how to make a Corn Custard? I brought my recipe along, in case somebody might want it. Five ingredients, for Corn Custard, or Pudding:

2 cups fresh or canned corn, or dried	1 1/4 teaspoons salt.
corn soaked and cooked.	3 eggs, and
2 tablespoons melted butter.	2 cups milk.

Let's check the ingredients: (Repeat)

Beat the eggs, and mix all the ingredients. Pour into a buttered baking dish, and place in the oven, in a pan containing boiling water. Bake the corn custard slowly, until it is entirely set to the center, in a moderate oven (350° F). Corn, canned Maine style-- that is, with the grain scored and the pulp scraped out-- is especially good for use in this kind of a dish.

Now take the next dish, Shoe String Carrots. Florine thought she didn't like "ugly old carrots," too, but she was so charmed by the novelty of "Shoe String Carrots," cut on a vegetable slicer, that she ate every "shoe string" served on her plate.

Next, Brussels Sprouts. Ordinarily, Florine balked at the mere mention of cabbage, but Brussels Sprouts -- well, they were something else. "Little toy cabbages," Florine called them, and she liked the delicate flavor.

The thin, oven-toasted bread, dry and crisp, like zwieback, made quite a hit with Florine. And what do you think? No one even mentioned the fact that the oven-toasted bread, or "Melba toast," provided good exercise for her teeth. I expect that such a statement as that would have made her dislike it, from the first.

For dessert, we had apple sauce and plain cookies. Sounds quite ordinary, and prosaic, doesn't it? But it wasn't. You see, the applesauce had a bit of red jelly on top, like the "stop" light for traffic. And the cookies were cut in animal shapes. I see no reason for making common round cookies for children, when there are all sorts of fancy cookie cutters to be bought, for a few cents.

I wish you could have seen Florine eat her share of this meal. She didn't have to be coaxed at all. In fact, it was easier to manage Florine than it was to manage her parents. As soon as we sat down to the table, her Father asked: "Where's Florine's milk? She's got to--"

"Hush!" said Florine's grandmother, giving him a warning look, "can't you talk about the weather, Henry?"

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And that was the last time Henry mentioned Florine's food. But of course, he couldn't be expected to know that Florine's milk was hidden in the Corn Custard.

Now let's repeat the menu, please: Corn Custard; Shoe String Carrots; Brussels Sprouts; Oven-Toasted Bread, Sliced Thin; Apple Sauce; and Cookies.

No more, till Monday.

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